Afrindian Fictions

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The immediate consequence of the dismantling of apartheid was a relentless examination of the menace of the past; however, even greater literary experimentation was one of the inevitable, if later, repercussions of decolonization. Literature could now expand its frontiers in creative ways. South African writers such as Njabulo Ndebele were already addressing this issue in the 1980s, calling for a movement away from the “spectacle” to “rediscovering the ordinary” by focusing on the “daily lives” forgotten in the grand narrative of political struggle (57). Such a literary turn would foreground the fact that “the problems of the South African social formation are complex and all-embracing; that they cannot be reduced to a single, simple formulation” (57).

For South African fiction, the “rediscovery of the ordinary” opened up extraordinary possibilities in form, content, and tone. One such thematic change is revealed in the turn to the preapartheid past in order to showcase the multiplicity of the “South African social formation” and to make sense of the democratic present. Frantz Fanon describes this retreat into history as using the “the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope” (210). Publications such as Anne Landsman’s The Devil’s Chimney (1997), Aziz Hassim’s The Lotus People (2002), Elleke Boehmer’s Bloodlines (2000), Ann Harries’s Manly
Pursuits (1999), and Zoe Wicomb’s David’s Story (2001) are only a few examples of a postapartheid literary tendency to mine the trails of historical memory in order to activate the here and now.

The archiving of the preapartheid past suggests a paradigm shift in South African literature: one in which stories not directly related to the segregationist scenario can be discovered and narrated. As André Brink remarks:

[C]ertain territories of experience...and certain regions of the past (notably those less obviously connected to the realities of apartheid) remain unvisited, or were visited only rarely, in much of South African literature, specifically in fiction. In the spectrum of possibilities now opening up to the writer in post-apartheid South Africa, these silent places invite exploration, almost as a condition for future flowering. . . . [U]nless the enquiries of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) are extended, complicated, and intensified in the imaginings of literature, society cannot sufficiently come to terms with its past to face the future. (“Stories of History” 30)¹

South African Indian fiction, shaped as it always is by broader literary developments, has also turned to the preapartheid past. However, the unique concerns of South African Indians, caught between the anxieties of diaspora on the one hand and the oppression of colonialism and apartheid on the other, engender a different form of literary retrieval: one that uncovers the story of Indian arrival in South Africa—as indentured laborers and traders—in order to assert national belonging in the present as well as offer all South Africans a vision of the diversity of their nation’s origins.

To fulfill that project, Praba Moodley’s The Heart Knows No Colour (2003) and Imraan Coovadia’s The Wedding (2001) travel down history’s passages to survey the migration of Indians to South Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since the worst of their battles were fought during the time of indenture, a period predating the institutionalization of apartheid in 1948, the experience of migrant Indians was expunged from a national memory so heavily focused on events following 1948. This invisibility was further exacerbated by the marginalization of Indians in a black and white national imaginary and the inevitable deracination of diaspora.

Betty Govinden laments the erasure of the story of Indian migration and delves into the cultural and phrenic consequences of indenture by
posing the following questions: “What thoughts filled the early Indian migrant workers in their physical and emotional encounter and confrontation with the colonial masters and the new land? What ‘counter-memories’ . . . came into being? . . . The stifling and even absence of a literary tradition among Indians prevented us from reflecting on our psychic displacement (“Learning Myself Anew”). Geographic transplantation results in loss—of culture, nationality, and selfhood—necessitating a turn to the past in order to retrace the history that has been erased. Moodley and Coovadia take up Govinden’s challenge to probe the history of indentured laborers and traders in order to expand the parameters of South African national identity today. In their triumphant proclamation of Indian arrival into South African citizenry, Moodley and Coovadia’s fixation with the past not only heralds the present but also a future in which a nation recognizes the different strands that compose its prehistory, thus fulfilling its promise of democratic inclusivity.

The Heart Knows No Color and The Wedding help create a “national culture” in the expansive Fanonian sense of the term: “the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people created itself and keeps itself in existence” (Fanon 210). The hybrid past invoked by these texts “resist[s] the dangers of a new totalitarian national history” (Moslund 34) as well as counters a tendency apparent in most postcolonial societies to create a monolithic and romanticized precolonial era. The two novels function as palliatives to the ethnocentrism of preapartheid, apartheid, and postapartheid repositories, a literary corrective that acts as a situational device for Indians as Indians in the postapartheid present.

By showing South Africans the diversity of their history, Moodley and Coovadia participate in the project of nation-making. In her study of South African historical fiction, Annalisa Oboe claims that “at the origin of the nation we find a story of the nation’s origin, in which history becomes a function of the foundational impulse. . . . Representations of the past become discursive productions of the narrating self, struggling not so much to have access to the ‘real’ world, but over the right to representational authority in and for the present” (175–76; emphasis added). Oboe argues that in helping to create a “foundational” story of nation creation, denizens of a state acquire agency in the present. Moodley and Coovadia inaugurate a new moment in South African Indian fiction: the birth of the historical novel tracing the extended periodicity of Indians in order to acquire agency in nation-making and to create an expansive South African identity that incorporates Indians into its spectrum.
The Heart Knows No Colour and The Wedding infuse Indianness with a sense of national belonging by demonstrating how subcontinental identity adapts to different phases in the migratory story. The novels reflect on the process and immediate consequences of migration, a thematic concern that underpins narratives of more recent Indian diasporas—particularly those in the West—but has only just entered the South African imagination as a result of the creative possibilities opened up by the end of apartheid. The Heart Knows No Colour and The Wedding are paradigmatic narratives of migration, but with key differences induced by the South African setting. Although issues that characterize diasporic communities everywhere are foregrounded, geography and history give us an alternative tale of diasporic interaction from those derived from East-West migratory stories. This difference in the migratory narrative allows us to trace South Africa’s central role in shaping Indian identity. In focusing on the Africanization of Indianness by tracing its gradual progress through the stages of migration, diasporic contact is reconfigured across an East-South axis even as the showcasing of Afrindian identity asserts South African nationality.

Literary representations of diaspora often begin with the voyage from the home country, move to focus on the consequences of transplantation, and end with settling down in the host country. Moodley and Coovadia also schematize their novels within this paradigm of migration while showcasing the radical difference place produces. Though their diasporic narratives commence and culminate the same way, the material circumstances under which Moodley’s indentured Indians migrate compared to those under which Coovadia’s passenger Indians migrate create two very different texts absorbed with the same circumstances of geographic dispersal. In South Africa, the diasporic story immediately varies as the arc of diaspora bifurcates according to historical contingency: one part is concerned with indentured or labor experience and the other deals with the passenger or trader experience.

Phase one of the indenture narrative that emerges in Moodley’s novel describes the voyage; phase two, the aftereffects of the voyage; and phase three, the process of settling down in South Africa. Since indenture was centered on a brutalizing servitude, its commemoration reflects that trauma. Phase one of the passenger narrative embedded in Coovadia’s novel concentrates on the physical act of migration, the process of “getting there”; phase two concerns the loss of culture and nationality that haunts the migrant; and the final phase emphasizes the ritual of settling down and confronts the migrant’s inevitable disconnect from the homeland.
Because passenger Indians were wealthier than indentured Indians, they could maintain emotional and cultural attachments to the subcontinent. The Wedding’s configuration of the Indian topos as a retrievable past reveals the class position of passenger Indians. Since the anxieties of indentured Indians centered on basic necessities like economic survival, Moodley does not record the stories of displacement and immigrant angst that Coovadia chronicles so superbly as the aftereffects of diasporic arrival. Coovadia’s narration of the passenger experience is more focused on the psychic consequences of migration than Moodley’s recovery of the indenture experience, which is governed by the physical violence of bonded labor. Both novels also evoke a mythic India, but in different ways. Moodley creates an imagined India in South Africa by holding onto an absolutist vision of Indian identity in order to heal the traumas of indenture. Coovadia sets more than half his novel in India, a literary strategy that establishes connections between East and South over time. The Wedding recreates the Indian topos itself in order to claim that India and South Africa were always already present in each other.

The Heart Knows No Colour and The Wedding reveal that South African Indians experience similar anxieties that are articulated in differing ways based on the historical event that is being uncovered. For example, the labor diaspora came into being through the exploitative processes of empire, while the trader diaspora emerged through the economic opportunities provided by colonial capitalism. One set of Indians arrived in conditions of servitude with little choice or agency in their migration and another set arrived voluntarily and with relative wealth, engendering two very different narratives about Indian immigration to South Africa. Colonialism and capitalism play a structuring—yet radically different—role in the indenture and passenger consciousness.

Both novels, therefore, focus on wealth and money making. The Heart Knows No Colour depicts a preoccupation with the rags-to-riches narrative, while The Wedding discusses the commercial motives that underpinned the passenger voyage. Each text also demonstrates a fascination with imperialism. While The Heart Knows No Colour uses the rhetoric of the colonizer, especially in its representation of black Africans through a series of imperial-era tropes, The Wedding’s Orientalist imagery is suffused with an impish irony that distances the text from the colonialist vocabulary it deploys. The preoccupation with the British Empire reveals the dominance of the West in the making of Indian diasporic identities, even those assuming shape in an East-South formation. We have already noted the difficulty in “provincializing Europe” in Karodia’s Other Secrets,
thus revealing that alternative discourses of diaspora often centralize Europe in both literal and literary ways. This fascination with Europe, and the self-conscious and unconscious use of colonial rhetoric, stems from the fact that Indians are in South Africa because the British Empire grafted colonial subjects all over its domain. However, because these texts recover an era of imperial dominance—even as they seek to subvert that dominance—they often give Europe salience.

Foregrounding the prehistory of migration also asserts the difference between the passenger and indenture experience, thereby separating two different stories of identity formation that were amalgamated into a singular Indianness in the apartheid archive. It must be emphasized that descendants of indentured and passenger Indians differently articulate similar concerns, such as egalitarian citizenship, memory, hidden histories, relationships to the British Empire, the Indian contribution to South African life, their oppression preceding apartheid, affiliation with black Africans, and the emergence of Afrindian identities. Yet Moodley and Coovadia garner these tropes for a shared purpose: to affirm the South Africanness of Indians and the Indianness of South Africa. The South Africanness of Indians allows subcontinentals to claim belonging in the democratic present, while the Indianness of South Africa compels the nation to acknowledge its “rainbow” composition and the impact of neglected minorities on its cultural, political, and economic history.

**Citizen Cane:**

*The Rags to Riches Narrative of Praba Moodley’s The Heart Knows No Colour*

Praba Moodley’s novel *The Heart Knows No Colour* (2003) is unique in its restoration of the historical density of indenture in order to bring it to public cognizance. Ndebele points out that “there [exists] a disturbing silence in South African literature as far as peasants, as subjects of artistic attention, were concerned . . . seldom do we see peasants, in their own right, struggling to survive against the harsh conditions of nature or man-made injustice” (24–25). Moodley’s novel thus fills a lacuna not only in the South African Indian literary imagination but also, more broadly, in South African cultural representation by endowing the indentured peasant experience with a “certain human validity” (Ndebele 25).

*The Heart Knows No Colour* also fulfils other agendas through its plotting of the various moments in the process of indentured migration:
Moodley links Indians to other dispossessed groups in South Africa, reminds her audience that apartheid was not the only mode of oppression, underlines the historicity of the Indian presence in South Africa, and justifies their inclusion as fully empowered citizens of the democratic nation. Moodley’s alternate history of the struggles of Indian migrants who came to South Africa in conditions of near slavery emphasizes the psychological and physical suffering of the indentured laborers. Her novel cautions its readers to remember Indians, other victims in the struggle for equality, a struggle that predates the institutionalization of apartheid in 1948 and is therefore easy to forget.8

The plot of *The Heart Knows No Colour* is relatively straightforward: The novel’s protagonist, Sita Suklal, comes to South Africa with her family as part of the great wave of labor migration in the late nineteenth century. Sita falls in love with Albert, the white brother-in-law of the plantation manager, and becomes pregnant with his baby. She marries an Indian man to confer legitimacy on the child. The rest of the novel deals with the consequences of Sita’s secret, the child’s hidden patrimony, and the upward mobility of the Suklal family, who flourish economically following their release from servitude. Moodley also records the trauma of indenture in meticulous detail.

In underlining Indian preoccupation with issues of oppression, both specifically Indian and generally South African, Moodley challenges stereotypical representations of Indians as apathetic and politically inert. However, the text occasionally espouses reactionary racial and class politics, even as its explicit agenda promises a radical reconceptualization of the South African past. Many of the Indians here are insular and politically quiescent. While the text’s class politics are intimately tied to the rags-to-riches narrative that is predicated on the success of the “by your bootstraps” myth, the novel’s racial hierarchies remain a puzzle, especially because an illicit interracial romance governs its thematic register. Even as Moodley uses the past to establish Afrindian connections, the identity she foregrounds is a conflicted one that is governed by Africanization through place rather than through race. Moodley’s notion of Afrindian identities also disrupts the somewhat homogenous representation of racial interaction between Indians and blacks—of either solidarity or tension—by nearly erasing black Africans from the story.

Moodley constructs an emblematic narrative of diaspora by sketching the various phases in the arc of indentured migration. The text traces the movement of labor from India to South Africa in the late nineteenth century, the destitution of living conditions under indenture, the unfold-
ing of the diverse life stories of Indians after the period of indenture had lapsed, the maintaining of cultural identities in diaspora, and, finally, the feeling of being at home. Heart opens in 1879, on the long nautical voyage undertaken by the Suklal family from India to South Africa, commencing the first phase of the indenture migratory arc: the process of getting there. The liminal space of the ocean suggests the liminal identities that South African Indians will occupy as they restlessly move between South Africa and India, while perhaps never quite belonging to either. Moodley captures the anxieties of indentured Indians and gives the ceremony of indenture due recognition: “Small boats had been sent out to the ships to bring the immigrants ashore. After a couple months of seasickness and bouts of terrible illness, which came with living on an overcrowded ship, relief was clearly written on their faces; in their haste to set foot on land, the newcomers virtually fell over one another” (16). Narrating the arduous journey of the labor diaspora gives Indians a Middle Passage of their own. That indenture, like slavery, was a condition of absolute servitude is not widely known. Moodley inscribes this history of trauma into the South African collectivity by recognizing the horrors of the journey itself.

The forgotten trauma of the voyage can also be traced to the East-South diasporic encounters that this project foregrounds. The theme of the passage, “the voyage out,” is not a major preoccupation of Western diasporas, obviously because these migratory formations mostly took shape in the days of air travel and were often journeys of choice made by relatively wealthy people. However, the ordeal of travel is an important aspect of diasporic stories that originate from the experience of indenture, marking the preoccupation with the voyage as a central characteristic of East-South migratory exchange, especially in context of the experience of indenture.

Moodley goes on to describe the conditions of indenture by focusing on the living arrangements of the Suklal family after their incorporation into the labor economy. This reflects the second phase in the indenture trajectory, a concentration on the process of bonded labor rather than on the theme of national acculturation that characterizes the passenger migratory story and many other diasporic itineraries: “When her family first arrived at the plantation, they had been allocated rooms in a long building called a barracks, erected solely for the labourers. It was cramped and unhygienic and the Suklals, like the other labourers on the plantation, hated it” (29). As for the labor itself, Sewcharran, Sita’s father, complains: “We work like animals here. We have to be up before the sun rises in the east, and toil in these stupid fields until after the sun sets in the west,
and they even expect us to work on a Sunday, without any extra pay!’” (18–19).

While the above recitation might sound like a mere catalogue of horrors, the text achieves more than just the narration of a forgotten past. Many diasporic stories focus on the deprofessionalization of skilled labor, alienation, assimilation, and racism by white society. Moodley demonstrates that such issues rarely infiltrated the psyche of the Indian laborer, whose life centered on the physical hardship of everyday life. By giving these stories a fictional layer, Moodley attempts to circulate them as widely as possible, endowing this forgotten trauma with a reach that historical repositories may not possess. In uncovering buried histories, Moodley etches them in South African public memory. The narrative reconstruction of the indentured past also stresses the contribution of Indian labor to the South African economy, emphasizing that the country’s wealth was built on the backs of the economically dispossessed, including Indians. The historical recuperation analyzed above pursues this novel’s agenda—and that of South African Indian fiction in general—of recognizing subcontinentals as indisputably South African.

In revealing the horrors of indenture, Moodley articulates Indian arrival into South African citizenry through land rather than through communion with indigenes. Brinda Mehta asserts the importance of land in the indentured psyche in the Caribbean:

[According to Khal Torabully] The first indentured immigrants were an agricultural labour force that toiled the land to make its first impression on non-native soil. The Indian identification with the land was twofold, symbolizing a metaphysical umbilical affiliation with the rural lands of India as well as a politicized inscription of memory on the land. . . . Earth-anchored memories promote a prismatic sensibility that reflects the earthy dynamism of the soil, which [guarantees] permanence and continuity. (144–45; emphasis added)

Similarly, Fijian politician Krishna Datt claims that “a symbiotic relationship of love and balance develops between the Indo-Fijian household and the land. For four generations of Indo-Fijians, that land has now acquired a very special, sentimental and religious significance . . . land holds me here, provides me with a sense of identity” (in Cohen 65).

Like their counterparts in the Caribbean and Fiji, indentured South African Indians were physically tied to the land and thus wrote their memories on and through its surface. Remember that indentured Indians,
like slaves, tilled the land but could never claim ownership. Neither did they see any of the profits of their physically wrenching work. Moodley’s carving of Afrindian identity through land becomes profoundly subversive in its reclaiming of the soil, an act Mehta describes as a “territorial repossession” (176). In emphasizing the backbreaking labor with which Indians sustained the soil, Moodley appropriates an essential part of South Africa—its land—and makes it uniquely Indian.

In another instance of “territorial repossession,” Raymond, a friend of Sita’s brother Gopi, tells him that he now owns, rather than works in, a banana plantation: “I have owned this plantation for the last thirteen years,” Raymond stated. ‘I have built it up from virtually nothing, and today I have a thriving business. I basically supply the whole country with bananas,’ he added proudly” (190). Raymond’s affirmation of ownership of the banana plantation evokes the Afrindian identity that emerges through land. This Afrindian identity acquires national agency by its proprietary acquisition of the site of Indian labor. In seeking control through soil, Moodley also suggests that, like the earth, Indians are a natural, organic part of the South African landscape. Yet the assertion of an Afrindian identity through land rather than through people may create problems of its own. Land, after all, comes alive only through its inhabitants. Moodley’s appropriation of the land on behalf of the indentured raises an important question: Who owns the land—those who broke their backs tilling the soil or those from whom the land was taken away in the first place? Moodley’s reclaiming of place, especially by creating plantation-owning characters, might place her protagonists uncomfortably close to the white plantocracy.

This affiliation with Europeans rather than with Africans is simultaneously mirrored in the novel’s plot. On the one hand, the story at the heart of Heart is of an illicit romance between Albert, the white plantation manager, and Sita, the daughter of indentured Indian immigrants, a schema challenging the racial boundaries consolidated by apartheid and imperialism. On the other hand, the novel is mostly silent about the presence of other nonwhites in general and black people in particular. Sita’s crime is ultimately forgiven by her husband and by society, but it is significant that her lover is a white man. A similar crime may not have been sanctioned with a black man. The narrative also seems preoccupied with skin color among the Indians themselves. Sita, the protagonist, is fair. We are told this repeatedly. Gopi’s wife, Rani, is dark skinned: “[Gopi] looked past her dark skin: all he saw was the woman he loved” (70).

We are also told that “Rani toiled in the fields from dawn to dusk, and her once olive skin was now darkened. One had to look at her closely to
appreciate the pretty features she possessed” (70). That Rani’s skin has
darkened by working on the land suggests a blackening that puts indentured Indians closer to Africans racially. In tilling African soil, Indians have become African, a change in citizenship and racial status suggested by the darkening of their skin. Yet this fraternity is undercut by the assertion that “one had to look at her closely to appreciate the pretty features she possessed,” a claim suggesting that dark skin hides “pretty features.” If light skin is the acceptable sign of beauty in The Heart Knows No Colour, it further distances the characters from the darker black Africans. The preoccupation with fair skin reveals how a text that challenges racial boundaries often fails to challenge the aesthetic hierarchies acquired from European imperialism. In revealing that the heart does know color, the novel exposes the extent to which the indentured consciousness is implicated in the process of colonialism. Moodley interprets Indian-African relationships through the prism of imperial discourse even as the narrative disavows the potency of the colonizer through its appropriation of (what the colonizers thought to be their) land.

An ideological affiliation with white Europeans perhaps leads to problematic ties with black Africans. Sita’s son, Mukesh, says: “We Indians are made of strong stuff. The white and the black man think that because we wear garlands and pray to statues we are weak and ignorant, but Gandhi has shown them differently. We don’t need a rifle to fight, we have words and pen and paper” (240). While this foregrounds political commitment derived from Gandhian principles of nonviolence, it hinges on separatist rhetoric. The Heart Knows No Colour constructs a vision of Indianness based on not just community, but insular community that extends itself outward only to embrace whiteness.

The novel is also characterized by a notable absence of fleshed-out black characters. Heart’s representation of the few Africans that inhabit this text is, again, structured by Orientalist rhetoric. After Sita’s daughter Rani is raped by Albert’s son Joseph, she visits a Zulu witch doctress to induce an abortion:

She was greeted by a wide, toothless smile and eyes that glinted in the light. The wrinkled old lady had colourful beads encircling her neck, arms and legs, and was wrapped in an equally bright blanket. . . .

Grinning, the old lady reached out and with surprisingly gentle hands touched Rani’s tender breasts and slightly swollen belly. . . . A wild shriek sprang from her throat as she ran backwards. (257; emphasis added)
My italics point to the proliferation of Orientalist stereotypes in the extract. As we already know from the novel’s color-coding of feminine beauty, Indians internalized European representations of other colonized people. There is nothing ironic or self-conscious in the depiction of the Zulu woman, suggesting, as it does, a fecund and feral nature. Even though Rani speaks to her in Zulu, the woman initially seems incapable of forming whole sentences and speaks in fragmented phrases. The black woman who cannot verbalize but instead uses an incoherent vocabulary of her own brings to mind Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, once again showing us the extent to which Indians even today approach Africa and Africans through the hermeneutic lens provided by colonialism. Since this is one of the few times a black character enters the novel, it is important to note that the text portrays her through a series of stock images that seem to be distinctly imperialist in origin.

The representation of the inarticulate black woman demonstrates that Afrindian identity is never absolute; instead, it is full of gaps, fissures, and holes that may compromise the progressive charge that it historically sought to bestow upon itself. The novel’s racial schema also reveals the centrality of Europe in the making of Afrindian identities. Indians came to South Africa because of Europeans, they were deprived of their rights because of Europeans, and even now often respond to black people through the stereotypes of European colonialism. In revealing the limits of Afrindian identity, *The Heart Knows No Colour* suggests that Euroaf-rindian, rather than Afrindian, might be an apposite moniker for Indians in South Africa. No matter how rigorously we construct alternative trajectories of diasporic exchange, Europe often manages to reclaim center stage. Similarly, no matter how much Indians may disrupt the black-white paradigm of race relations in South Africa, the ideologies of whiteness often end up asserting their supremacy.

Moodley’s choice of genre also demonstrates the influence of Western modes of perception. *The Heart Knows No Colour* can be classified as romantic fiction, even though it blurs literary categories as historical archive, social tract, and text of feminist awakening. In using the genre of romantic fiction (which Jane Bryce and Kari Dako describe in another context as a “devalued ‘feminine’ form”) to excavate the hidden history of Indians in South Africa, Moodley “undermines masculinist presumptions of what constitutes an appropriate field for revolutionary action” (Bryce and Dako 160). Yet the romance novel is a Western genre that is particularly complicit in the Orientalist project. As Bryce and Dako point out, romantic fiction was usually set amid “exotic locations and period
settings [but] they rarely serve as more than a backdrop to the private drama of the white protagonists” (157). Substitute white protagonists for Indians and exotic locations for black South Africans, and we may arrive at the conclusion that South Africa and black South Africans exist only as background against which Indian psychic turmoil and the rags-to-riches story can unfold. Even though Moodley’s project of historical recovery undermines some conventions of the romance genre, the novel still subscribes to many of its central formulations.

Race relations in The Heart Knows No Colour signal a significant rupture from other South African Indian fiction encountered in the course of this project. But Moodley’s novel also raises another question: Why do Indians have to assert belonging through affiliation with black Africans, despite having been in South Africa for 150 years? Moodley’s refusal to stage these alliances exposes the fracture in the rhetoric of affiliation as well as heralds another moment of arrival: one where it may no longer be necessary to make gestures toward racial comity in order to inscribe Indian belonging in the South African psyche. Moodley’s eschewal of links with black Africans also reflects the postapartheid political landscape in which the racial harmony of the past implodes. The interaction with whiteness often dominates racial exchange in Western diasporas. In East-South interactions, especially in South Africa, race relations become triangulated between white, black, and Indian. Indians have to grapple with the two races and where they fit in within that binary formulation. In refusing to negotiate with Africans in any explicit way, Moodley seems to reject the East-South paradigm of diasporic interaction that the migratory pattern in her novel validates.

Heart ends in 1919, a year that not only heralded the end of the First World War but also continued the severe restrictions on migration from the subcontinent to South Africa initiated in 1913. While many South African Indians remain mired in poverty, the Suklal family has risen in the world, thanks to the death of banana plantation owner Raymond, who leaves all his wealth to Gopi. The novel closes with a celebration of Indianness, with the Suklal family and all their friends gathered together to celebrate the seventy-fifth birthday of Chumpa, Sita’s mother. Only one person, Mukesh, is politically active: “The family was a little terrified of his passion for politics: he had . . . turned into a serious man, who voiced his political views with such candour that it was frightening” (264).

Mukesh’s political passion terrifies and frightens his family, who retreat into wealthy ethnic enclaves instead. If another way of inserting Indians into the spectrum of the nation is to claim their commitment to political
equality, insular Indianness may compromise that radical intent. Diasporic identities often result in new hybrid forms of being that confirm the closure of the migratory arc through the process of settling down. Are the Indians in *Heart* unable to achieve this synthesis, not only because of their inability to forge kinship with other nonwhite South Africans but also because of their ultimate disavowal of political commitment, an ideological stance that was almost necessary for finding place and belonging in South Africa? Yet it bears repeating that this is another instance of postapartheid literary arrival, one in which asserting political commitment is no longer necessary for South African citizenship.

In the monetarist social order that the novel espouses, it is apposite the end showcases the paraphernalia of rich Indian life. This is where the complexity of historical recovery collides with the simplicity of the romance genre. *Heart*’s fantasy of upward mobility, with all the gaudy excesses of wealth, is very much in keeping with the genre of the romance novel that promises happy endings amid material splendor. Chumpa reflects on the rags-to-riches ambit of her biography: “She had come to Natal, against her wishes, scared out of her wits; today it was her home and she had raised her children here” (264). Moodley attempts to carve a place for indentured Indians in South Africa: “[T]oday it was her home” is a significant assertion. The suffering of the indentured laborers, and their commitment to remaining in South Africa by acquiring agency over the land, has earned them a place in the chronicles of the nation. Yet Indian social harmony seems to have been achieved through isolation. The concord depicted in the final pages of the novel suggests a separation from other South African communities:

> Her guests—family, friends, and business acquaintances—were dressed in simple yet elegant splendour. The ladies, adorned in rich silk saris, many with intricately designed gold jewellery, and their spouses in formal suits, some still wearing turbans but minus the dhotis . . . her guests had been given . . . [banana] leaves to eat off—the way they had done when they first arrived. (265–66)

In its focus on the richness of the saris and the delicacy of the gold jewelry, the novel paints a picture of Indians as exotica. In evoking their arrival in South Africa, the banana leaves also suggest that Indians remain frozen in that moment of time. Significantly, the men abandon their dhotis for “formal suits,” implying their Westernization rather than their Africanization.
The novel’s racial and class politics suggest that the Suklal family remains suspended in some sort of nether realm, clinging to an imagined and mythic India. Even though Vijay Mishra’s description of the old diasporas as “diasporas of exclusivism” does not hold true of other South African Indian writers (“Diasporic Imaginary” 422), Moodley’s depiction of the Suklal family at the end of her novel suggests that her Indians at least create “self-contained ‘little Indias’” for themselves (Mishra 422). This retreat inward is perhaps a consequence of the anguish of indenture that necessitates a simpler, more fantastic narrative in order for its restorative vision to succeed.Indentured Indians were too poor to keep in touch with their Indian past, too illiterate to even write letters home. Their disconnection from the “homeland” was further vitiated by South Africa’s isolation from the international community during apartheid. The only India that is available to Moodley is an India that is always already South Africanized and always already a romanticized fantasy, suggesting a “loss of the real” that is a tragic consequence of migration in general and indentured migration in particular.24

Frantz Fanon’s comments on “cultural retrieval” may further enable a more nuanced interpretation of The Heart Knows No Colour. Fanon claims that a turn to the past is often “directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others” (in Desai 200). Similarly, Robin Cohen states that throughout “the Indian labour diaspora, the success of petty entrepreneurship was to provide a role model for those emerging from rural impoverishment” (79). In turning to the “very beautiful era” of wealth and professional success, Moodley provides a healing communal vision as well as a “role model” for people traumatized by a brutal history.

Passages from India:
Revisiting the Trader Experience in The Wedding

Imraan Coovadia’s debut novel, The Wedding (2001), revises South Africa’s history by resurrecting traces of the Indian presence in the making of early twentieth-century Durban.25 The novel’s buoyant, Rushdiesque prose provides a stylistic counterpoint to the bleaker narratives of Agnes Sam, Jayapraga Reddy, and the early Farida Karodia, although its use of
humor resembles Ahmed Essop’s sly wit. The Wedding is narrated by the nameless grandson of its central character, Ismet Nassin, who migrates to South Africa at the turn of the nineteenth century, dreaming of economic prosperity with his new bride, Khateja.

Coovadia creates history out of family lore, as events in the novel are inspired by stories he grew up listening to in Durban.26 The Wedding reminds us not only of the nexus between the private and the political but also of a dialectic easily forgotten: Indians have a century-long presence in South Africa that has changed South Africa as much as South Africa has changed them. The Wedding thus celebrates the history of Indian beginnings in South Africa. That it is able to unearth these buried life stories without compromising its opulent sense of humor heralds yet another new moment in South African Indian literature: the genesis of the comic novel written with Dickensian aplomb. According to Elleke Boehmer, “in the South African novel as in sport, in language, the time for breaking the inherited rules is here, now. Writers need ‘parameters’ as broad as it is possible to have, for the metamorphoses that may unfold will, if nothing else, be unpredictable and astonishing” (“Endings” 55). The Wedding bursts the boundaries of the South African novel by refusing to take even its history-making moments seriously. The novelty of this novel rests in its ability to laugh at the grave events in human history as well as in its mining of the preapartheid past in order to recover the story of Indian arrival in South Africa.

Although Indians were transported to South Africa as indentured labor from 1860 onward, traders from the subcontinent began to arrive only a decade later. Passenger Indians, as they were called, came to South Africa to establish what they thought would be lucrative trading enterprises.27 That Ismet belongs to this category of migrant Indians is repeatedly underlined in the early sections of the novel: “Ismet Nassin was a businessman at heart, an enthusiast of the economist Ricardo” (3). Later in the novel Ismet’s wife, Khateja, describes him as a “businessman-capitalist” (92). Ismet is also “quite fond of these English and their elastic bands and their cricket balls and brussels sprouts. . . . Yes, the Englishman was a creature after his own heart” (4). This Anglophilia is not incidental. The fact that South Africa was also a British colony spurred many Indians to travel to the southernmost tip of the African continent. That trader Indians were often conversant in the English language facilitated their mercantilist agenda. Coovadia floods his texts with cultural codes situating Ismet in a particular historic juncture, explaining and justifying his migration southward.28
The Wedding provides an elaborate chronicle of its characters’ lives preceding the migratory moment, thus deviating from the few other resurrections of Indian immigration to South Africa that focus only on life after the process of diasporic transference. This is also an important distinction from other South African Indian fiction we have encountered in the course of this project. The Wedding is one of the few South African Indian novels set in India. The first half of the novel offers an account of Ismet’s courtship of Khateja, their fraught relationship in India, and their consequent migration to South Africa. The preoccupation with India brings to mind migratory texts in recently formed diasporas, such as Bharati Mukherjee’s The Tiger’s Daughter (1972), Leena Dhingra’s Amritvela (1988), Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses (1989), and Meena Alexander’s Fault Lines (1992). As first-generation immigrant narratives, these novels are as preoccupied with the home country as they are with the host country.

Coovadia’s agenda is different from these texts. The India section in The Wedding does not merely breathe life into the prehistory of migration, although that is certainly one of its purposes; it also foreshadows Ismet’s migration to South Africa as well as the inevitable merging of cultures that follows. Coovadia inserts South African cultural practices and historical moments into the India section and Indian cultural practices and historical moments into the South Africa section. This move anticipates the flowering of Afrindian identity in direct ways. If the term “Afrindian” suggests the dialectical possibilities of migration, Coovadia points to the “always already” aspect of relationships between East and South engendered not just by migration but also by recovering its forgotten history.

Coovadia thus uses the first section of the novel to fuse the disparate worlds of India and South Africa. The Wedding depicts Ismet’s arrival in Khateja’s village home though the vocabulary of intercultural contact: “Things seemed to have lost their concrete edges, their definitions. In this new climate would a bharfee be a bharfee, a three-cornered samoosa, a three-cornered samoosa?” (29). The “new climate” of migration leads to a blurring of the solid surfaces of past lives. This clouding of the past is ironically demonstrated in Coovadia’s use of South African Indian spellings to describe Indian sweets and snacks, which are more usually spelled as burfi and samosa. Even when South African Indians attempt to retrieve the Indian past, it is never a pure evocation of the world they left behind; rather, it is always infused with the sensibilities of the South African present. The slippage foregrounds the South Africanness of Coovadia’s novel even as the text attempts to recover the cultural ethos of India. Coovadia
reveals the South African aspect of his imagined India paving the way for the Indianness of South Africa.

In another example of forging bonds between different histories and geographies, Ismet is sent hurtling across the train carriage when he first sets eyes on Khateja. However, Coovadia describes this phenomenon as if Ismet is about to be evicted from his carriage: “He’d caught sight of the woman through the window when he was swept from his seat and hurled across the width of the carriage by an invisible hand” (12). Coovadia further claims that “they were physical signs, brutal—to the extent they’d cast him across a railway carriage and bruised his two elbows to boot” (14). The above description obliquely recalls Gandhi’s epiphanic eviction from a train in South Africa for sitting in a whites-only carriage. Gandhi as mobilizing trope emerges repeatedly in South African Indian literature. By paralleling Gandhi—the South African who returned to India—with Ismet—the Indian who goes to South Africa—Coovadia inscribes East into South and South into East, erasing differences between continents and cultures in the process.

The importance of India in this novel’s schema is also anchored to the specificity of the passenger migratory experience. Passenger Indians could afford to maintain ties with India after migration, unlike indentured Indians, who did not have the financial wherewithal to even write letters, let alone make trips home in order to find “good Indian wives,” the way their trader counterparts could. Thus the descendants of passenger Indians can claim an India to which they can imaginatively return. Their ability to go back—even only in literary ways—arises from the concatenation of attachments that passenger Indians have been able to forge because of the material exigencies under which they migrated. However, if bonds with India are often used to accuse Indians of a disloyalty to the host country, Coovadia’s evocation of India makes his migrants more South African, not less. For South Africa and India were always connected—or so the novel claims.

In the second half of the novel, the paradigmatic arc of passenger migration—starting with the diasporic journey, moving to issues of national and cultural loss, and ending with the migrant’s disconnection from the “homeland” and settlement in the “host” country—unfurls in organic progression. “So the two of them, beetle-backed migrants—bickering, feuding, mixing it up—disappeared from the face of India. They simply vanished. Somehow there’s never enough ceremony at the migratory watershed” (129). Mother India has neglected to reclaim her wandering African children, who have instead “simply vanished” from her shores.
The novel styles itself as “the ceremony at the migratory watershed” by giving migration the space, the voice, and the history it deserves.

In chronicling the journey, Coovadia rehabilitates the forgotten narratives of passenger Indians and bestows their stories with a personalized cast: “With Khateja by his side, he saw himself forging a commercial empire, founding a dynasty, patronizing culture. A sea change. Riches, dragons, treasure barrels, roaring crowds, strange territory, trading delegations” (105). Ismet’s desire to voyage out is underpinned by the imperialist fantasy of mastery, patronage, and commerce. In his search for “trading delegations” and “strange territory,” Ismet harbors colonial desires of capitalist conquest. Conceiving of Africa as a blank slate, Ismet collapses the continent into a land without history:

They set sail for Africa, a clean table of a continent: . . . Whenever one climbed off on a railway platform in history-free Africa, one wouldn’t expect to stumble immediately upon a village. . . . There would be an untamed volcano, a chop-licking leopard circling around in the evening time, the poisoned darts of the bone-nosed natives whistling through the air to make sure they would always turn to the other for reassurance. (119–20)

Shades of *Heart of Darkness* again? While the extract quoted above is suffused with Coovadia’s impish sense of humor, it also provides us with a useful example of how imperialist rhetoric was disseminated among the colonized. Ismet imagines Africa with all the tropes of empire, indeed as his civilizational Other. Indians immigrated to Africa not only to colonize with commerce but also with imperial preconceptions of the continent already firmly entrenched in their psyches. Betty Govinden remarks that Ismet “does not see his resolve imposed upon him by a larger reified colonial mentality” (“Performance” 161). Yet Coovadia satirizes Ismet’s complicity with the hierarchies of empire. Ulrich Broich points out that the “imperialist approach to history is often directly mentioned in [post-colonial] novels” (437). Coovadia not only showcases the “imperialist approach” that many nonwhites imbibed but also critiques colonial discourse by piling up one ludicrous stereotype after the other: “bone-nosed natives,” “chop-licking leopard,” “untamed volcano.” This rhetorical strategy of excess then forces us to consider the ridiculousness of all stereotypes.

When Ismet arrives in South Africa, he realizes there isn’t that much of a difference between India and South Africa, East and South, past
and future, history-less and history-full. On their long voyage southward, Ismet and Khateja initially view the African coastline with trepidation. All their anxieties about entering a primitive world existing outside the parameters of time and history seem to be confirmed upon encountering “just the clear light and the plants and the birds and the water and the land” (135), a geography devoid of people. Once they see the city of Durban, the Orientalist binary collapses: “[L]o! there are railways heavy with locomotive and track, there are tall buildings, even a minaret, clean plaster houses by the hundred, sorry, thousands, there is a city tabled out on the hills, oh shining city!” (137). Ismet and Khateja’s first impression of Durban situates the city as a beacon of immigrant hope that bustles with the modernizing effects of imperial commerce. The fact that even a minaret arches from the Durban skyline suggests that Islam already has a presence in South Africa. In collapsing differences between India and South Africa, here, by marking Durban with the recognizable familiarity of industry and Islam, Coovadia inscribes each into the other.

Ismet initially dreams of re-creating South Africa in an Indian image. He fantasizes that in South Africa he would help produce “a legion of children... a hundred, a thousand, peopling the vast land, young giants. ... They would lounge on Ismet’s knee, tumble about on the ground ... raise cities from the tree and stone, fashion minarets, eat beef in the red” (120). While fashioning minarets is particularly germane to Ismet’s grand design of populating South Africa with India and Indians, he is also ready to Africanize himself: “it would be a mistake to think that [Ismet] hadn’t put some thought into the question of how the two of them were going to fit in, in South Africa. ... Without some kind of adjustment on their part, progress was out of the question. ... There is such a thing as customs and traditions you see” (149). Changing oneself as well as being the active agent of change are key aspects of the dialectical possibilities of migration. Ismet is most likely referring to the African traditions, which he must respect in order to belong, but he could also be thinking about his own traditions, which he must maintain in order to preserve his sense of self. Regardless, Coovadia reveals the tension between assimilation versus maintaining culture that migrants everywhere have to negotiate.

The next phase of migration is the aftermath of “getting there” and the migrant’s inevitable confrontation with the problems of nationality, culture, and belonging. While these issues are complex anywhere, the unique racial situation in South Africa exacerbates migratory anxieties even more: “He hadn’t realized how complicated and messy the situation of South Africa was, and he derided himself for it” (150). The novel
points out that that nationality—indeed, the nation-state itself—comes into being in diaspora:

Durban . . . one million strong: one-third black, one-third white and one-third Indian. Since Durban housed the largest number of Indians in a single place outside India, it was, excluding the subcontinent, the most rhetorical city in the world. (And thanks to its piebald multistriped composition, the municipality of Durban inculcated in the mind of the expatriate Mohandas Gandhi, who was currently residing there, the outrageous conviction that each disparate subcontinental belonged to the same nationality—and so, in a sense, Durban created the nation-state of India.) (142–43)

The city of Durban further splits the binary of black and white into a trinary. Coovadia also claims that the Indian presence in South Africa not only altered Durban beyond recognition, it also willed the Indian nation into existence. Coovadia gives agency to South African Indians in the making of South Africa as well as in the making of India. In showing how India first came into existence in South Africa, Coovadia skillfully deconstructs national boundaries. But Durban does not just inaugurate India’s accession into nationhood. It is in Durban that subcontinental South Africans proclaim their entrance into Indianness. While this may be troubling in its anticipation of the divisive taxonomies of apartheid, it reflects the second phase of the diasporic arc: the migrant desire to cohere in clusters of national and cultural similarity, often forgoing the comforts of regional affiliation for a more globalized Indian identity.

In keeping with his desire to Indianize South Africa, Ismet steadfastly maintains Indianness through what he consumes:

India is a portable country, to some extent, which moves as people do, accommodating itself freely to new environments, but if they started off forsaking her, forgetting her in this and that detail, what would happen at the end of time?

Ismet saw suppers, Sunday dinners, snacks on the weekend-time, curries, biryanis, bhajias, pathas, and pooris as the first essential step, the harbingers, the bringers of a new order among things and a new set of relations between men.

Philosophically, what was a family if it didn’t sit down together to table? Where was community to be found if not in the breaking of a nan, the passing round of a pickle dish? (157–58)
According to Kogila Moodley, “religion, music, customs, traditions, and distinctive food tastes [among Indians in South Africa] formed part of the reconstruction of a womb-like structure to act as a bulwark against a hostile environment” (459). Ismet’s gustatory gusto enacts a sweep of substitutability in which food performs a synecdochic function by creating the Indian community forsaken by the act of migration. Thus the second phase of the diasporic narrative—or the immigrants’ struggle to recreate the culture left behind while adjusting in their new environs—envelops Ismet’s everyday existence.

But the resolute emergence of Indianness articulated above also intersects with the African world it inhabits. Indianness is a compromised entity in diaspora, always inscribed by the geographic location in which it is inserted, even when it organizes itself into creation only through migration. No sooner is a pure Indian identity willed into existence than it is altered by place. While cooking Indian food for Ismet, Khateja douses the meal with “six bags red chili powder, twelve grated green chilies, a big glass bottle of black pepper . . . for good measure a fifth of a pint of Tabasco sauce in the prawns” (178). The fact that Indian food becomes too hot to handle is significant. In South Africa, the atmosphere is such that even the most ordinary efforts at maintaining identity are vitiated by the heat of political culture. The novel declares that no matter how vigorously Indians maintain ethnic identity, it is always infiltrated by the red-hot South African context. That Khateja uses Tabasco sauce—an American invention probably given to non-Westerners through colonial contact—in Indian culinary preparations underscores the presence of the West in the making of Afrindian culture.

Ismet slowly begins to adjust to life in South Africa, despite his efforts at maintaining an Indian identity. This is the final phase of the paradigmatic arc of migration: the process of settling down. “He was starting to feel perfectly at home. He looked at the blacks in blue overalls, light-bodied men sweating in the heat and moving boxes or grumbling, and he wanted to put his arms around them” (176). By claiming fraternity with the indigenous inhabitants of South Africa, rather than with the settler whites, Ismet is allowed to feel at home. Feeling at home results in an obliteration of contact with the homeland. Coovadia sketches this extirpation against events taking place in early twentieth-century Durban: “Around these star-spangled anti-lovers, South Africa started to burn, a slow ignition that would continue for the remainder of the twentieth century” (222).

Ismet and Khateja are gradually absorbed into the macropolitics of
South African life. Without knowing it, they find themselves “mentally denationalized”: correspondence to and from India becomes rare and they begin to accept that their stay in South Africa is permanent. Apartheid catches up with them when they are forced to relocate to a “segregated suburb” outside of Durban:

There were fewer letters back and forth to Bombay and Rashida—imagination, which is capable of joining together countries ten thousand miles apart, must be admitted to be a mercurial power. Like any deracinating system of forces and energies, the imagination sponsors moral and filial disorderedness. My grandparents got mentally denationalized, so to speak. (265)

The narrator claims that his grandparents were denationalized rather than renationalized, seemingly indicating that they were unable to tether their selfhood to South Africa and, like many other diasporics, remained trapped somewhere between past and present, home and host. Yet the word “denationalized” also evokes the systematic stripping away of citizenry—through the creation of Bantustans for black Africans, forced removals and depriving Indians of South African citizenry until 1961—to which all nonwhite South Africans were subject in some degree or the other. In underlining a common history of suffering through the simple use of the word “denationalized,” Coovadia paradoxically renationalizes Ismet and Khateja: To be South African is to be trapped in its unique history of racism, violence and oppression.

In observing Ismet and Khateja’s disconnect from India, Coovadia laments the failure of the imagination in connecting the past to the future. Yet the rejoining of India and South Africa through the mediating consciousness of the South African Indian novel invests the future with the possibilities of the past. As the narrator points out, the reason for telling his grandparents’ story is important: “[T]he mask that’s worn into my grandmother’s face has a symbolic function: by rendering her more or less anonymous, more or less interchangeable, it indicates that her story is no longer really her own. It belongs to our common history” (267). The use of the phrase “common history” is referentially vague, and deliberately so. While the most obvious signified to the signifier “common history” is the collective subcontinental heritage that Ismet, Khateja, and other South African Indians share, “common” also expands to include the history of South Africa that Indians, Africans, and Europeans have created. Coovadia turns to the past to retrieve this shared history in order to
create a space for Indians as South Africans in the collective imaginary of the present and to reveal to other South African ethnicities the Indian contribution in the making of South Africa. He thus offers us a more “optimistic view of history” than Broich credits most other “postcolonial historical fiction” with (438). According to Broich, “history is seen to be a heavy burden which deeply oppresses the present” (438). Yet, as Ndebele argues, “the past, no matter how horrible it has been, can redeem us. It can be the moral foundation on which to build the pillars of the future” (155). In Coovadia’s view of history, the past can salvage the present; all we need to know is how to retrieve it.